

UNDERSTANDING INDIA AS A COMMUNITY IN THE TIMES OF COVID-19

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Abstract

In these hard times, when the world is plunged into the nightmare of COVID – 19, it has become important for the research fields, across the globe, to understand its different impacts and future consequences, which are inevitable in the aftermath of the situation. Research, in different fields, has been focussed on understanding the different aspects of epidemic and pandemic to revise the old strategies and frame better ones. With the idea of studying the social aspect of the present pandemic, this paper deals with the idea of ‘community’ and its emergence in such events. Its primary focus is on the ‘local’ truths within the singular nation, which do not equate to the slogan ‘stay happy, stay safe’, when the variables of class and gender are incorporated. The work also provides information to present the case of ‘toxic speech’ that leads to divisive state within this community; whereby majority experiences the community power over minority. It discusses the said binary not in terms of number, but social privilege. It has studied the context of India, via articles and news pieces with examples from other countries to substantiate the gravity of the stated issues to be considered for social developmental plans during pandemic.

Keywords: COVID - 19, Community, Local, Minority, Experience

INTRODUCTION :

The *Situation Update Report – 7*, by World Health Organisation, stated the situation of COVID – 19 in the world as that of a pandemic on 11th March, 2020, when the number of positive cases had reached 132, 758 globally (March 14, 2020). By 25th March, 2020 (WHO *Situation Update Report*, 28th March, 2020) Indian government had also declared a state of national lockdown to curb the growing number of active cases. As the country was going through lockdown 3.0, from March 4, 2020, a feeling of similarity of concern and fear that knitted the nation into a community was observable. Benedict Anderson, in his detailed work about *Imagined Communities*, has explained this coming together as the formation of an *imagined community*, where people are unaware of each other’s existence, but experience solidarity through the similarity of experience (2006:6). This experience of being together, facing the grim times, provides the cultural understanding, through which one can observe the formation of Nation, a *communion*, from the political entity State (4). The present pandemic has united people worldwide into an imagined community, facing the mammoth crisis in different spheres of their lives, in different forms, together. The role of media has been very crucial during this time. It has enabled the reading and watching audience to remain alert and informed about the daily happenings around the situation. Starting from lockdown 1.0, till the present Unlocking 2.0, each calendrical date has become the unifying point for a huge population, as they present similar concerns and challenges to the people of the country.

However, the picture should not deceive one into homogenising the narrative of the country into one single story. The history of the pandemic will not have pages of the falling economy alone. It should not be only about the shutting down of education institutions and physical attendance at offices. It should not be only about the rise of exposure to online websites and streaming sites. It is necessary, as the present work argues, to remember the cases of displaced migrant workers across the globe. It is necessary to remember that the advent of unlocking does not merely mean attendance at the office for one set of the population. The COVID-19 did not act as a biological virus alone, and media did not act as the platform to spread information alone. Individual narratives frame the history of the pandemic in the country. Each behaviour has a story that has been focused in the present work, as one should not forget the past, and maintain a homogenous understanding of the country.

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Was the lockdown uniform in its impact over a household?

The novel corona did not spread as a uniform virus, impacting only individual health and its allied services. It had spread among different countries as parallel problems in the form of social traps, developing a different community, unheard and helpless due to national lock downs in place worldwide, ironically within the safety of homes. The number of cases of domestic abuse by family members and intimate partner had increased by significant percentage across countries and had made the domestic environment more dangerous than the outdoor. One of the articles in the Indian national daily *The Hindu* reported the statement of a woman as *trapped* within the domestic abuse problem from her *short-tempered* husband and family members and that she tried reaching out to the city helpline number as each day became a nightmare for her, depriving her of her sense of safety (April 20, 2020).

The National Commission for Women, India, had stated that it received an approximate of 257 online complaints of domestic abuse and violence during lock down 1.0. The daily notes that the global cry of being safe indoors was not a shared feeling as it had formed a threatening situation for many women within the supposedly safe spaces. Study had also found the inclination of the quarantine policies towards the urban areas, leaving the rural areas in a precarious state, where women were more prone to domestic abuse and fail to access any help from outside (Lima et al, 2020:1). The statistics recorded in other countries provide the substantiate evidence that this was one of the branches of this global pandemic that had impacted women's community across borders. The international health sector body, World Health Organisation, in its reports, *COVID-19 and violence against women/ What the health sector/system can do*, had mentioned the increase in number of domestic abuse cases in USA, UK and China. One of the reasons, as per WHO, for the rise of domestic abuse was the isolated state of women, whereby she was unable to contact helplines or neighbours in times of crisis. The shelter homes or legal aides also became a distant solution for them. It had also mentioned that the domestic resources, which were dependent on both the partners, became scarce due to lack of formal income for women who worked on wage basis, leading to their economic abuse within the house (2020:1). Statistics prepared in different parts of the world had noted the increasing number of calls to the domestic abuse helpline numbers, as women were unable to bear the brunt of not only physical abuse but also psychological and sexual violence. There had been a 20% increase in the number of calls in Spain, 40-50% increase in areas of Brazil, 30% increase in Cyprus. In one of the hotspot regions of COVID – 19, United Kingdom, the domestic abuse organisation *Refuge* has found a significant increase of calls by 25% within a week after the lock down was put in place and 150% increase in the visits to its website. It is tragic hard fact that there had also been an increase in the number of domestic homicides in countries of Spain and UK (Jones and Isham, 2020:2-4). The numbers do not explain the agony and the anxiety each woman was facing, in the world, going through every morning news and evening headlines, hoping for the day when the doors would open for them. These cases loudly state the privilege within the grasp of one gender, that made the safety measures partial. The lack of accessibility and the control over the domestic space by their partners had put women under the pressure of extra regulations, aside from the national regulations. The divided nature of the national community can be understood from the idea of privilege provided by Peggy McIntosh, who has observed that *males are not taught to recognise their privileges as whites are not taught to understand their privilege* (McIntosh, 1988).

Is Unlock 2.0 dry of the sweat and blood of lockdown 1.0-3.0?

This study has also acquired and presented information about the discrimination observable within the premise of class disparity. One of the columns in *The Hindu*, read, *Lockdown protects the well-off, but what about those who face hunger, homelessness or poor health* (*The Hindu*, April 18, 2020). These well-offs include the upper-class and the upper-middle class and the middle-class people who have the access to some form of entertainment and a secure state inside their permanent homes during the lock down. Even though the pandemic has not differentiated between the rich and the poor, in terms of infection, it did not have the same impact on the latter as the former. This privilege does not allow the resourceful class to stay safe completely but it allows security and safety to some extent. The columnist, whose article was stated previously, vividly showed the disparity that COVID-19 has presented during the lock down (*The Hindu*, April 18, 2020).

The slums of India have housed crores of people, who have been subject to hardships in the form of economic, health and social deprivations. These people are not privileged enough to stay indoors and have a break from

the daily life routine, as some of them, especially women and children, can be subjected to domestic abuse as was mentioned previously. These 'packed' areas do not allow the possibility of social distancing and the risk of the virus to spread is more in an already unhealthy environment within these rooms.

The ones who are able to make their place in the economic run by being part of informal sectors have also been pushed into a precarious condition, where the anxiety is not only about the end of COVID – 19, but a yearning to reach back home. These workers were dependent on their wages, dependent on the amount and days of work done. However, the lack of transparency and far-sightedness had resulted to inevitable slashes on these workers due to the lock down regulation. The relief package promised by the Centre did not meet the required levels when people were unable to access basic shelter and security due to lack of prior provisions (*Atlantic, March 27, 2020*). The International Labour Organization, in its third edition, covering *COVID – 19 and the world of work*, had mentioned that more than 2 billion workers worldwide are part of informal sector and the situation of lock down has impacted more than 76% of the informal employment over the global scale (2020:7). These workers were left stranded and hopeless as every form of transport was shut down. They were forced to take to their feet to cross kilometres of distance, without any aid or health safety. They were later stopped at the state borders by the police and had not been given very civil treatment. The ground reality seems very distant from the unifying slogan of 'stay home, stay safe'. The words seem empty and lost to the slum dwellers and the migrant workers who are facing larger threats on a daily basis, compared to the pandemic or have no home to take refuge.

The efforts of the government to transport these marginalised members of the nation, even though presented as a relief for them, did not account for huge help. The special trains and buses arranged for these workers do not allow them to escape the economic deprivation. They had been dependent on their daily wages and their return to their homes will not be a relief entirely as they will face shortage or absence of resources for survival (*The Indian Express, May 07, 2020*).

The people whose state have made it to the headlines of some daily and have only remained limited to the opinion sections of other dailies are no aliens or strangers. These are the same people one can locate as one is waiting at the bus stand, as one is passing by the dingy corners of the city, as one is looking across the road and spot a dark-faced, palsied mother carrying her undernourished child. These are citizens of the nation. However, they have not become the part of policies as citizens. They cannot become part of the same narrative, without memories of the long walks and violence and deprived state, of being safe indoors, away from the virus outside. These body of people share solidarity with their kinsmen who share similar hardships abroad. To mention one significant example, the domestic workers, of Asian and African origins in Middle Eastern regions like Lebanon and Jordan, face physical and sexual violence as the lock down measures in these regions have barred them from going back to their homeland. They have been restricted to the bare minimum by their employers, who also hold the power over their visas. As one of the reports mentions, these workers are in a state where either they are exhausted, depressed, anxious or end up committing suicide (*Aljazeera, April 4, 2020*). The city of Singapore has made the factor of being a citizen crucial, but out of reach, for the migrant workers, consequently depriving them of safety aids. They have to depend, without assurance, on civic bodies to gain these tools. In the country of Malaysia, the exodus of large number of migrant workers has threatened not only this group but also the region in itself. These people were pushed to an extreme state to have crowded near the Thai-Myanmar border, which reiterates the disparity in privilege between them and the ones in comfort of social distancing (*The Diplomat, March 31, 2020*).

Is COVID-19 the only virus infecting this population?

The difference in the impact of COVID – 19 over different sections of the community is not only due to a difference in class and gender, but also a difference created by stigmatising a community, based on certain prejudices and beliefs, given impetus by equally ignorant power. Ervin Goffman, in noting the impact of stigma, has explained the development of a 'virtual social identity' of a community or a person, creating a discrepancy with its 'actual social identity'. The whole of the community or the person is shrunk to certain attributes, tainting the person or the community for the later times (1990:5-6). This stigmatisation has an adverse effect on a community when it faces the fate of being minority, which is under the threat of toxic speech.

Lynne Tirell, in her work on toxic speech and its effects, theorised the influence of toxic speech through the science of epidemiology. This study tried locating her concept in the present stigmatisation at work in the

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country. Tirell explains the problem of toxic speech as a community problem, and as important to be solved as any virus. It spreads, as she theorised, through two actions – the *speech acts* and the *license departure*. The former acts as an entrance into the game, whereby one is allowed to make the next statement in line with the first. The latter leads to the end of the game, engendering actions by a certain speech act (2017:2-5). Language does not work in isolation from the other factors present in the environment. It can act as a throttle to make something permissible by repeating a certain notion and can engender violence or hatred or a rift. The speech act is important to trace the first notions or stigmas made by a community and the licensed exists of those acts, which have allowed the later stigmas to disseminate against a community without required policing. Within this game it is also necessary to observe the tropes that are used as adjectives for a community, which become the *expressive commitment* (2017:7). These tropes have the potential to reduce a community to a chain of meanings associated with the adjective used as the bullet; thus, the group is made equal to the value of the trope. The problem with such speeches or discourses or, considering the present context, posts and messages, is the absorption of notions, when there is no resistance, that can lead to social disharmony as,

Toxic speech includes speech that denies whole groups the power to participate, pits group against group, fuels polarization, undermines the foundations or core of a shared social world, and more. (2018:122).

Tirell's idea about the spread of the speech virus and its impact can be seen spread across headlines and columns and posts which are in circulation about specific communities during the pandemic. National and international news had found a heightened state of Islamophobia, as a parallel to the fear of novel corona, which had gone unchecked by the biased institutions with political and religious motives. In the aftermath of Jamat Tablighi case, the Muslim community had faced non-verbal and verbal discrimination. Their place as the citizens of nation had been attacked by media posts and further supported by institutions. Some of the *expressive commitments* which can be observed to have been repeated over media are *#Humanbombs*, *Coronajihad*, which had been forwarded and viewed by atleast 165 million people, having appeared for about 300, 000 times (*Aljazeera*, April 7, 2020). Such messages, here acting as speech acts, provided impetus to justification for religious discrimination. One of the dailies reported that young Muslims have been beaten with cricket bats as they were giving food to the poor. In Punjab, verbal toxicity was spread through the speakers of Sikh temples (*New York Times*, April 12, 2020). The crisis of the Muslim community was not limited to any one region. Actions around Islamophobia were also present in countries like USA and UK, where Muslim communities were facing similar attacks or were not allowed to return back from other countries to their home (Suryah Bi, 2020:5).

Another group, which was, and continues to face the brunt of unthoughtful stigmas is the community of North Eastern settlers outside North Eastern India. Even though they are a part of India's history and geography, these people have always faced a discrimination based on their physical features and cultural difference. Amidst the growing anxiety of the pandemic, headlines have been found stating the spread of racism against this group of people in Gujarat, at a dental insurance call center. Some journalists have emphasized on the importance and the responsibility of the government to spread awareness about this community to break the old walls of stigmas (*ThePrint*, March 27, 2020). One of the reports from Karnataka in *TimesNow* reported that a student from the North-East was not allowed to enter a super market. Another report stated the case of harassment of a woman from Manipur in the national capital of the nation (March 29, 2020).

Conclusion

These accounts, which are still minimal from the large repository available, are important to observe the irony of the 'national' spirit that spoke about unity in the times of crisis. These marginalised, stigmatised, subdued members of the nation will not have the same narrative about these days of the lock down and will face serious issues even after the pandemic passes away. The impact of the pandemic had not been even across the nation and not for every person 'home' was equivalent to 'safety'. It had been a privilege, that had not been accessible to many till pressure led to special measures. For some, novel corona is only one virus, among the many other illnesses, to face during the times, when one's faith or geographical identity was determinant of one's place amidst the Indians of the country. The date on the top corner of different newspapers or digital news did unite the citizens of the country. However, the same dates recorded certain gaps, certain corners, certain voices behind the curtain or below the loud sermons about the national unity against a crisis.

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